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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE. LITERATURE CURRICULUM III, STUDENT VERSION.

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A GUIDE WAS PRODUCED FOR STUDENT USE IN NINTH-GRADE STUDY OF "THE MERCHANT OF VENICE." THE GUIDE PRESENTED SEVERAL ALTERNATE APPROACHES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PLAY AND LEARNING ITS CONTENT. A MAJOR EMPHASIS OF THE GUIDE WAS PLACED ON THREE FORMS OF STUDENT QUESTIONS, RELATED TO SPECIFIC ACTS AND SCENES, THE CHARACTERS IN THE DRAMA, AND THE PLAY AS A WHOLE. THE CORRESPONDING TEACHING GUIDE IS ED 010 816. RELATED REPORTS ARE ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160 AND ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832. (JH)

OREGON CURRICULUM STUDY CENTER

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

Literature Curriculum III
Student Version

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1. Introduction

You are about to begin a study of Shakespeare that will continue through the next three years, so that at the end of your high school career you will have had some experience with at least four of his plays. They will differ greatly from each other in subject and style and mood, and each year in reading and discussing a new play you will want to look back at what has gone before for purposes of comparison and contrast. It should be interesting to you to see how your attitude toward this playwright will change as you become better and better acquainted with him during the four years.

It is perhaps unfortunate that we have to "study" Shakespeare. He did not write his plays for school and college classrooms, but for a theater that was very much a going concern. We do not know very much about Shakespeare the man, but we do know that he was himself an actor, that he was assigned parts in his own plays, and that he grew wealthy (like another great entertainer, Mark Twain) in his profession. That is to say, he knew his business, worked hard at it (he wrote 37 plays in the space of about 20 years), and clearly passed the day-to-day box-office test. His audience didn't have to study him. Its members were in an immediate, spontaneous relationship with him, as we are with the plays and movies of our time.

However, even in his own lifetime, his plays were not only seen and heard in the theater but were read as well, first published singly in what we would call "pirated" editions. Then, in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, two of his old fellow-workers in the theater published the first complete edition of his works, now known as the "First Folio" (the story of "The Publication of His Plays" is briefly told in the introduction to your edition of The Merchant of Venice). One might imagine that in later ages, when men thought differently and spoke English differently and developed different relationships among themselves, Shakespeare's plays would have come to be known only to a reading audience with a learned taste for interesting antiquities. Well, Shakespeare's plays did of course become increasingly popular with the reading public after his death (there were more than 200 editions of his works in the 18th century alone); but they continued to be living theater as well, his popularity on the stage keeping pace with his popularity in the library and at the family fireside. In many parts of the world today theaters have been established which are primarily if not exclusively devoted to Shakespearian production. As you probably know, he has for several years now had what promises to become a permanent home in Ashland, Oregon.

Shakespeare has continued to be thus acted and read for many reasons, some of which you will discover for yourselves as you read him. You have been given this brief information about him here at the start in order to make a simple point: that in beginning now to read Shakespeare for yourselves you are joining with untold thousands and many, many generations of readers and theater-goers who before you have made their own discoveries about his interest and power. You are about to join a vast community of people who, although widely separated from each other in time and

place and manners and customs, have all taken this actor-playwright from Stratford-on-Avon to themselves. In other words, Shakespeare is a common--very uncommon, really--property of English-speaking people who helps to hold us together as human beings. Knowledge of his work makes communication among us more meaningful. His characters themselves--Romeo and Falstaff and Cassius and Brutus and Macbeth and Othello and Shylock and all the others--are points of reference that we may use in trying to explain ourselves to ourselves and ourselves to each other. Not to know Shakespeare is to deprive ourselves of one of our important means of becoming fully human.

And yet, at first, he must be "studied." Some effort, some investment of time and attention, is required. His English, for instance, was somewhat different from ours, in spelling and grammar and in the meanings of particular words (you will read about this in the Language unit called "Early Modern English--the Language of Shakespeare"). The names of some of his characters will be a little strange to you, and the reasons why those characters behave as they do may not always be immediately clear (just as the reasons for our behavior are not always entirely clear, even to ourselves). They also speak a good deal of the time in poetry--poetry which you will come to enjoy along with the rest of the large company of Shakespearians but which at first may cause some difficulty. But this difficulty and the others can be accepted as a challenge, and most people are stimulated by challenges. Give a little effort to meeting this one.

2. Your Edition of the Play

You will recieve considerable help in overcoming the difficulties of The Merchant of Venice from the edition of the play you are using. The opening section of the introduction, "The Quality of The Merchant of Venice," will provide you with some background information about the character of Shylock and will suggest one way in which the play can be taken ("To an Elizabethan, it was all a charming fairy tale"--will you feel that way about it when you have finished it?). On the pages facing the text you will find helpful notes on the play's language and brief prose synopses of each scenic block of the narrative. The latter are simply rough-and-ready guides to facilitate the reading of the scene; they will be pretty meaningless in themselves. The act and scene divisions are a convenience for easy reference, but they were imposed on the production scripts by publishers and editors and do not represent how the play should go on the stage. The stage curtain as we know it did not exist in Shakespeare's theater, and the action was continuous, somewhat as it is in the modern movie. (You will wish to ask such questions as this one: what would be lost if a ten-minute intermission intervened between the end of Act II, Scene IX, and Act III? If intermissions seem necessary, how many would you have and where would you place them?)

3. Form

In studying literature we have concerned ourselves with Form, Subject, and Point of View. Since up until the end of the last century, plays were

The Shakespearian Theater

1. Reread the account of the Shakesperian theater in your introduction (pp. xxvi - xxxiii). Identify the different sections of the theater on the diagram.

2. From what was the design of the Shakespearian theater taken? (xxvii)

3. How did the Elizabethan theater differ from ours in terms of performers? (xxvii)

4. When was the first theater constructed and by whom? Gradually more theaters appeared. What famous theater (most closely associated with Shakespeare) was erected in 1599? Study your map and locate as precisely as you can where this theater was situated. What were the advantages of having it located there? (xxix)

5. Is there any obvious reason why it was not constructed in the center of town?

6. How was Shakespeare's company formed?

7. Mention three other theaters existing in London at the time of the Globe Theater.

conventionally divided into five acts (when curtains came into use, playwrights tended more and more to structure their plays according to this division), the act divisions have long been a convenient way of approaching dramatic form. One formula has it that the good play reaches a climax or turning-point in the fourth act and arrives at a denouement (day-noo-mah) of resolution in the fifth. The Merchant of Venice seems to conform to such a pattern, with the great courtroom scene and the defeat of Shylock taking up all of Act IV and the final reconciliation of the lovers following in Act V. This is sometimes called a concept of "external form" because it seems imposed upon the play from without: its substance is divided, in a way of speaking, into five bins or receptacles provided in advance for the playwright's convenience.

Your teacher may wish to suggest another way of looking at the form of this play: in terms, that is, of theme and place and conflict. The theme of the play can be thought of as the opposition between love and hate. This opposition issues in character conflict (in Act IV, for example, Portia vs. Shylock), even more important in drama than it is in fiction (Shakespeare liked to work sword duels, wrestling matches, and battles into his plays). The opposition is also reflected in a contrast between the two places, Venice and Belmont; and the rapid movement back and forth between these two places is a much more important aspect of the play's form than its division into acts and scenes. In such ways, the play is structured thematically. Thematic structure can be thought of as "internal form."

Another aspect of the play's form is the style (actually styles) of its verse and prose. An awareness of the great stylistic variety of any Shakespearian play contributes immeasurably to our enjoyment. Set a few fragments beside each other:

Shylock:

> "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you."

Portia:

> "The quality of mercy is not strained;
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
> It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

Shylock again:

> "An oath, an oath! I have an oath in heaven;
> Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?
> No, not for Venice!"

Finally, the young lover Lorenzo:

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here we will sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears..."

They are all written in English, indeed quite simple English, yet how different they are in movement and mood, in meaning and effect. As a first step toward an enjoyment of style, almost as it were for its own sake, try simply to savor such differences. You may later be asked to analyze a few such passages, but it is best to begin simply by trying them on the ear. Learn to listen to the play as you read.

4. Point of View

Point of View will not be given much emphasis in the study of The Merchant of Venice, partly because one is less conscious of it in a play than in such a work as Roughing It, in which the author repeatedly calls attention to himself. He presents himself to the reader directly; he is "onstage". In a play the author is necessarily offstage; he cannot present himself directly as a story-teller. He is invisible. Point of View in a play seems to be centered exclusively in the audience. Point of View is "our front." It is the position of the eavesdropper.

Since the playwright can never appear in person to tell us what he thinks about his characters and their behavior, his point of view in the more general sense is often more difficult to get at than it is in the case of the autobiographer or novelist. Speculation, then, is in order. What is Shakespeare's "point of view" toward Antonio and Bassanio and Shylock and the rest of them really? Only the play itself can provide the answers, and many of them will necessarily be tentative.

5. Subject

The Subject of the play can be discussed in several ways--as theme, as narrative, as characters. These can be thought of as different aspects of the same thing, but you may find it most convenient to approach subject in terms of character. Your teacher will suggest ways of going about it. Characters, for instance, are made to reveal themselves in terms of motive--what makes them tick. Motive is the playwright's way of winding them up. When we first meet Bassanio, why, at that time, does he want to go to Belmont to woo Portia? Is it love alone that impels him? And how does Bassanio's motive set the whole narrative in motion? How does it connect the story of love and courtship with the story of hate and revenge (note that the plot of the play is multiple--for instance, besides the Shylock story, there are three parallel love stories. How are they made to connect?). What, then, is the motive of Shylock's thirst for revenge? Is it single or does he have more than one motive? How, as you progress through the play, does your growing understanding of his motives determine your attitude toward him? How, finally, would you cast the different parts? Such questions as these will lead you deeply into the heart of the Merchant of Venice.

And very close to the heart of this play is--to return to him--the character of Shylock. It has just been suggested that he is drawn in such a way that, even when we see that he is out to "get" Antonio, our attitude toward him may be mixed, to say the least. It should be clear to you very early that he is a victim of persecution, that Antonio's treatment of him, for instance, is often deplorable, and has been deplorable in the past; that the mistreatment he and his people have suffered goes a very long way toward explaining him. Then, when you have thought about it carefully, you will probably come to feel that Shylock represents not so much anti-Jewish prejudice as the evil effects of all prejudice in all times and places.

The German poet Heine records this experience at a performance of The Merchant of Venice in London more than a hundred years ago:

> "When I saw a performance of this play at Drury Lane, a beautiful pale-faced English woman stood behind me in the box and wept profusely at the end of the fourth act, and called out repeatedly: 'The poor man is wronged.' Her face was of the noblest Greek cast, and her eyes were big and dark. I have never been able to forget those big dark eyes weeping for Shylock."

Is there evidence in the play that Shakespeare would have felt her tears as at least not inappropriate, that it was his intention to inspire a profound sympathy for Shylock? If so, can the play nevertheless be called a "comedy"? Would another term perhaps be more appropriate? More importantly, has reading the play changed you in any way? These and other questions will help you to evaluate your own experience with it.

Next year you will read a Shakespearian play that is quite different in kind from this "comedy". Its subject is political assassination. That theme also, unfortunately, has some relevance to the age in which we live.

Student Questions

Act I, Scene I

1. As the play begins, Antonio tells his friends, Salerio and Solanio, that he is sad, but cannot account for his sadness. What suggestions do his friends make which would account for Antonio's feeling of depression?

2. Salerio and Solanio, apparently unable to cheer Antonio, greet three newcomers with considerable enthusiasm and find a graceful way of leaving Antonio. Who are the newcomers and how do Salerio and Solanio justify their departure?

3. Gratiano senses Antonio's depression. He is interested in discovering why one would "Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster." What is Gratiano's opinion of those who play the "strong, silent

type"? (Lines 99-103) Gratiano declares that he does not intend to take life too seriously ("Let me play the fool"). What advice does he give Antonio in lines 105-106?

4. Antonio agrees to follow Gratiano's advice ("I'll grow a talker for this gear.") Considering line 117, which he addresses to Bassanio after Lorenzo and Gratiano leave, do you think Antonio's response to the advice was sarcastic? Explain.

5. What is Bassanio's opinion of Gratiano?

6. Antonio quickly directs conversation to Bassanio's problems which apparently involve a lady. What does Bassanio reveal as his immediate problem? (Lines 126-138)

7. What generous offer of assistance does Antonio make? (Lines 142-143) Remember these lines as the play progresses.

8. Bassanio, encouraged by Antonio's promise of financial assistance, reveals why he needs money. What does he reveal? Does he seem to love Portia for her own sake or does her money seem to have influenced him strongly? Give reasons for your answer.

9. Antonio, at present short of cash, finds another way to help his friend. What plan does he suggest?

10. In a drama, characters show themselves through speech, gesture, mannerism, and general behavior. Try to understand the players introduced in Scene i by answering the following questions.

a) Do not be deceived into believing that Solanio and Salerio are important characters because they appear, along with Antonio, in the first scene. They are minor, but such minor characters perform important functions. They provide atmosphere, submit necessary information, serve as messenger boys, and, by contrast, help to build the major characters. Minor characters may act as confidants; they may provide comic relief and generally enrich the drama. Are Solanio and Salerio younger than Antonio? Do they seem to be particularly perceptive? Do they seem to be casual acquaintances of Antonio or real friends? Quote lines from the play to defend your answers.

b) Gratiano is quick to observe Antonio's melancholy state. Does his response show him to be a sympathetic person? Why? Does his view of life seem to be a generally cynical one? Defend your answer. Does knowing Gratiano help you to understand Antonio? How?

c) What role does Lorenzo play if we are to judge him by what he says to Gratiano?

d) How do you picture Antonio? How old do you think he is? Has he been successful? What character traits does Antonio's friendship for Bassanio reveal?

e) What can you tell of Bassanio's past life? Do you think that he really intends to pay his debts to Antonio? Does his pursuit of Portia seem to be quite clearly a business proposition? Examine closely lines 165-173 in connection with this point.

Act I, Scene ii

1. Here the scene changes from Venice to the city of Belmont. You will not have any difficulty locating Venice, but you will not find Belmont on any map. This will become a significant point as you see the play unfold. As the scene opens, Portia, the object of Bassanio's regard, is speaking with Nerissa, her maid. What does Portia reveal in her first speech?

2. Does her mood seem similar to Antonio's?

3. How does Nerissa respond to her mood?

4. What does Portia say in answer to Nerissa's comment that good advice is better if it is followed? (Lines 11-19)

5. What plan had Portia's father devised to guarantee a suitable husband for her? What do you think of it? What is Portia's attitude toward it? If you think of it as an unlikely way of arranging for the choice of a husband, does this affect your interest in the outcome? Why or why not?

6. What does Portia's description of the suitors tell about her own character? Does she seem to be a good judge of character? Does she seem to have a sense of humor?

7. How does Portia respond to Nerissa's reference to Bassanio? Does she try to disguise her reaction?

Act I, Scene iii

1. The opening discussion of this scene implies that Antonio and Bassanio have not been able to borrow 3,000 ducats (about $20,000) from friends. They had to ask Shylock, a moneylender. Shylock is considering the request. Notice the careful analysis he gives to this business proposition whereby he will loan the money to Antonio who intends to vouch for Bassanio. What particular factors for and against the loan does Shylock consider before taking the risk?

2. Before he makes up his mind, Shylock wishes to speak to Bassanio. Bassanio suggests a dinner meeting for the three of them. What is

Shylock's reaction to this? What does Shylock demonstrate by his remarks in lines 30-31? What makes him restrain an emotional outburst?

3. When Antonio comes on stage, does he greet Shylock?

4. Shylock is involved in his own thoughts. What do they reveal about his attitude toward Antonio? What specific grievances does Shylock hold against Antonio? Consider such things as how Antonio lends money, what his personal treatment of Shylock has been, what Antonio's religious and cultural background has been.

5. When called by Bassanio, how does Shylock excuse his period of meditation?

6. What is Antonio's usual attitude toward paying interest on a loan?

7. What additional grievance does Shylock have for Antonio after Antonio's comments in lines 130-137?

8. How does Shylock's attitude change? (Lines 137-143) Is it a sincere change?

9. Under what conditions does Shylock consent to lend the money to Antonio?

10. Although the bond is considered in a humorous light, what does Bassanio fear?

Act II, Scene i

1. While Antonio is sealing Shylock's bond so that Bassanio can go to Belmont, Portia continues to resist the advances of her suitors. As Act II opens, the Prince of Morocco is addressing Portia. What picture do you have of Morocco? That is, what kind of person do you think him to be from what he says?

2. Does Portia seem to be in a more serious humor than she was in Act I, Scene ii? Do you think that her reaction to Morocco might have been different if her fate were not dependent on his actions?

3. The Prince of Morocco is advised that he must first visit the temple and then dine before he is allowed to select the casket. How does this delay affect the audience?

Act II, Scene ii

1. A street in Venice is the setting for one of Shakespeare's typical comic scenes, featuring here Shylock's servant, Launcelot Gobbo, and Launcelot's near-blind father. Launcelot's play on words and the

teasing of his father delighted the audience of Shakespeare's time. In this particular comic interlude, however, certain important ideas are conveyed. What is Launcelot planning to do? What do we learn about Bassanio from Launcelot's conversation with his father? Does this disclosure reinforce your earlier notion of Bassanio's value?

2. A happy coincidence brings Bassanio within speaking distance of Launcelot and old Gobbo, thus affording Launcelot the opportunity to carry out the plan he had been discussing with his father - Does Bassanio accept him into his service?

3. When Gratiano enters the scene, what favor does he request of Bassanio? What warning does Bassanio give him? What does this scene tell us about the progress Bassanio is making?

Act II, Scene iii

This scene, though very short, advances the play rapidly. You begin to fear for Shylock as you see his daughter Jessica make her plans. What does Jessica ask Launcelot to do? What does she hope to do? What kind of person is Jessica? How do you know? How do you think Jessica's attitude toward her father compares with Portia's attitude toward hers? Would Jessica be as likely to obey the terms of her father's will as Portia is?

Act II, Scene iv

Again a short scene is marked by much action. Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salerio, and Solanio are planning a masque--a popular form of amusement whereby a group wearing masks and other disguises would go in procession to a house where a festival was being held. There they would present a short play. This particular masque had been planned to help Jessica escape. She is to disguise herself as a torch bearer. What role does Launcelot play in this scene? What message does Lorenzo give him? What news does Lorenzo give Gratiano after the others depart? Does this scene cause you to be sympathetic toward Shylock? Why or why not?

Act II, Scene v

In this scene, Shylock prepares to dine with Bassanio. What reason does he give for accepting the invitation? Do you feel less sympathy for Shylock in this scene? Defend your answer. When Launcelot tells Shylock that there is to be a masque that night, how does Shylock react? What does Launcelot say to Jessica? After Shylock leaves, what does Jessica say to herself?

Act II, Scene vi

Jessica's escape is realized in this scene. She takes with her much of her father's wealth. Do you agree with Lorenzo's comment: "For she is wise...," or do you conclude that love is blind? How do you think Shylock will react when he discovers Jessica's elopement? Why, do you suppose, does Shakespeare not include the masque in the play after he had had those involved plan so carefully for it? How does Antonio's brief appearance at the end of Scene vi advance the play?

Act II, Scene vii

While Bassanio and the others are en route to Belmont, Portia is still being troubled by her suitors. The Prince of Morocco, having dined, is now ready to select the casket which will determine his success or failure as a suitor. Does he pick a casket at random or does his selection of the gold casket reveal his character quite clearly? Read Scene vii again and see if you can form a clear picture of Morocco. When he fails, does he accept his loss gracefully? Does Portia's reaction seem worthy of her? How do you interpret Portia's response to Morocco's loss?

Act II, Scene viii

Once again, minor characters serve a useful purpose. Through the conversation of Salerio and Solanio, what do we learn about Shylock? What foreshadowing is given concerning the fate of Antonio's ships? What do we learn about Antonio's character and about his relationship with Bassanio?

Act II, Scene ix

In Belmont, meanwhile, the Prince of Arragon is trying his luck as a suitor. What do his speech and his choice of casket tell us about him? What is Portia's reaction to his failure?

Act III, Scene i

Salerio has heard that one of Antonio's ships has been wrecked and relates the news to Solanio. Shylock's arrival interrupts their conversation and focuses their attention on the Jew's double loss: his daughter and his jewels. Does Shylock mention his financial loss? How do Solanio and Salerio treat Shylock as he discusses his daughter? Does their attitude change? Why?

One of Shylock's most famous and moving speeches follows Salerio's question: "Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh: what's that good for?" Does this speech increase your sympathy for Shylock? Do you feel a strength in Shylock that is not present in Salerio

and Solanio? Does this speech seem applicable to many situations in our own century?

As Salerio and Solanio are being summoned by a servant to the house of Antonio, Tubal, Shylock's friend, enters the scene. Shylock's grief and bitterness increase when he learns that his daughter and his jewels have not been found. What brings a sudden change in Shylock's attitude? Tubal seems to break the bad news by degrees, following a particularly shocking story of Jessica's irresponsible behavior with a reminder of Antonio's plight. How do you react to Shylock's desire for revenge? His displeasure with Jessica? Does Tubal play more than the passive role of a messenger?

Act III, Scene ii

As the fortunes of Antonio become increasingly precarious, Bassanio is basking in the glow of Portia's growing devotion. How do Portia's speech and attitude differ from her speech and attitude toward the other suitors? What new side of Portia do you see in this scene? What is Bassanio's line of reasoning as he selects the casket? Does he seem to be guided by the same motives he revealed in earlier scenes? Portia makes no attempt to hide the delight she feels when Bassanio selects the correct casket. How does she declare her love? What does she give Bassanio as a symbol of her love and willingness to share with him all her worldly possessions? What strict regulations accompany this symbol?

1. "You saw the mistress, I beheld the maid," Gratiano announces. What effect do you think this turn of events might have had on an Elizabethan audience? Does Gratiano seem to be a different kind of person from the Gratiano we met in Act I?

2. This happy scene is interrupted by the arrival of Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio, but only the latter has an important task to performm He delivers a letter to Bassanio from Antonio. Portia observes Bassanio as he reads the letter and her comment shows the audience that trouble has come. What news does the letter contain? What must Bassanio tell Portia which he had hoped, perhaps, to keep secret a while longer?

3. Salerio and Jessica increase the tension and help Portia to see the seriousness of the situation. What tribute does Bassanio pay his friend? What quick solution does Portia offer? Does Bassanio accept her advice?

Act III, Scene iii

Scene iii finds the fortunes of Antonio much changed. Shylock demands his bond and rejects the oft-repeated entreaties of Antonio. Antonio knows that law rules Venice and resigns himself to his fate. In the closing speech Antonio defends the law. How does he justify the law? What is

his "last" prayer? Does Antonio act as you expect him to? After reading the scene, what can you conclude about Shylock's frame of mind?

Act III, Scene iv

Portia has a plan as this scene clearly shows. Relate in your own words the steps in her plan that she reveals. First, what does she tell Lorenzo and Jessica? Then, what instructions does she give to Balthasar? Finally, what does she tell Nerissa?

Act III, Scene v

Can you see any purpose for this scene? Does it help you to know Jessica and Lorenzo better? If so, how? Does this scene make it seem that sufficient time has elapsed between Act III and Act IV so that the action seems more believable?

Act IV, Scene i

1. In this scene, you find yourself in a court of justice in Venice. Antonio is to face his adversary. The Duke is, as you would expect, the very essence of efficiency. He has, as the dialogue shows, tried in vain to change Shylock's course of action. He offers Antonio little hope. Shylock, he declares, is "...an inhuman wretch / Incapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy." What is Antonio's attitude? (lines 7-14)

2. When Shylock is brought into the court, the Duke addresses him. What does the Duke say he thinks Shylock plans to do? How does Shylock respond to the Duke's analysis of his plan? When Bassanio challenges Shylock, what does Antonio say to his friend?

3. What offer does Bassanio make to Shylock?

4. The Duke rebukes Shylock for his refusal to show mercy. What do you think of Shylock's response? Who has the better argument, Shylock or the Duke?

5. The Duke's declaration that he will dismiss the court unless Doctor Bellario arrives is interrupted by Solanio who announces that a messenger has arrived with letters from the doctor. Who is the messenger?

6. While the Duke is reading the letter, Gratiano and Shylock exchange harsh rebukes. What does Gratiano say to Shylock? What is Shylock's attitude toward Gratiano?

7. The Duke, having read Bellario's letter, asks that the young and learned doctor sent by Bellario be welcomed into the court. Who enters?

8. Portia readily admits that Shylock has the law on his side, but declares that he must be merciful. What does Portia have to say about the quality of Mercy?

9. In answer to Bassanio's request that Portia alter the law a little, the young "judge" declares that "...there is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree established." How does Shylock react?

10. Shylock is about to claim Antonio's pound of flesh when Portia asks Shylock a very interesting question. What does she ask? (lines 266-267)

11. What is Antonio's attitude at this point?

12. What rash statements do Bassanio and Gratiano make which arouse the attention of Portia and Nerissa?

13. Portia delays Shylock's action by telling him to "Tarry a little." What is Shylock's reaction? What role does Gratiano play? Seeing that he has lost his case, Shylock says, "Give my my principal, and let me go." How does Portia respond? How does Portia destroy Shylock completely? Do you sympathize with Shylock? How does he take his defeat?

14. What is the purpose of the ring episode which closes this scene? Does it provide comic relief?

Act IV, Scene ii

1. What is the purpose of this short scene?

Act V

Most of the drama in this play is completed before this act. There is only the story element about Bassanio's ring to be resolved. Basically this scene constitutes the happy ending to the story.

1. Where does this scene occur?

2. How have their surroundings inspired Lorenzo and Jessica to dwell upon certain romantic legends? What kind of night is it? What kind of surroundings might one see in an Italian garden during the 16th Century?

3. Check a reference book for information about the lovers: Troilus, Thisbe, Dido, Media. What attitude about love do they share?

4. A messenger interrupts Lorenzo and Jessica's reverie. From whom does he come?

5. Pretending to be a messenger, Launcelot also arrives. Whom does he announce?

6. What preparation does Lorenzo make for their arrival? See lines 57-60.

7. Jessica and Lorenzo remain outside enjoying the beautiful evening. To what does Lorenzo equate the movement of the stars and heavenly bodies? Musicians arrive and begin playing. What is Jessica's reaction to hearing sweet music? What is Lorenzo's explanation of her attitude? (lines 77-95) The latter portion of Lorenzo's comments about music reproach the man whose values do not include music. Has Shylock earlier revealed his attitude toward music?

8. As Portia and Nerissa approach, what frame of mind do they seem to be in? Consider, for example, Portia's reaction to the music she hears.

9. Lorenzo immediately recognizes Portia. What promise does he make to her?

10. How does Portia greet Bassanio and Antonio? What is the cause of the dispute between Nerissa and Gratiano immediately after Portia greets Bassanio? (See lines 154-171.) How does Gratiano explain his actions? How does Portia tease Gratiano and bring Bassanio into the discussion? (See lines 179-189.) What is Bassanio's private reaction to being brought into the conversation?

11. Gratiano blurts out that Bassanio also gave his ring away. What is amusing about Bassanio's speech as he attempts to explain?

12. What is humorous about Portia's response to Bassanio's rationalization?

13. What is Bassanio's reaction to receiving another ring from Portia? Portia's and Nerissa's earlier antics are finally revealed to a confused Bassanio and Gratiano.

14. What pleasant news is in the letter Portia hands to Antonio?

15. What pleasant surprise does Lorenzo receive?

16. What wealth does Gratiano claim to have?

Subject as Character

The characters in a drama are revealed through what they say and what they do. As a member of the audience, although a reading one, you must try to determine why the characters speak and act in a certain way. You are concerned, in other words, with motive. What happens, who makes it happen, and why the person makes it happen form a kind of circle. Take a number of these circles all of which are somehow interrelated and you have a story, a novel, or a drama. Or take a play like The Merchant of Venice and try to identify the individual circles and disentangle one from the other. Such an analysis is a difficult but fascinating puzzle.

The questions which follow will help you understand the characters through their speech and actions and through the motivation behind both. The questions will also help you form judgments about these characters. Are their motives and the resulting words and actions believable? If motive, speech, and action are believable, usually your belief in a character will follow. Actually you follow this same pattern in your daily life. You are familiar with clichés like the following: "I knew he could do it," or "I wouldn't put it past him." You say these kinds of things because you know or think you know what makes people tick. Now that you have read The Merchant of Venice, you know what makes certain characters act as they do. Knowing Antonio as you do, for example, you are not surprised by his attitude of resignation in Act IV, Scene i.

The questions will lead you from an analysis of several of the simple characters to the more complex ones. One more point should be considered before you begin. The dramatist, unlike the novelist, must depend on actions and dialogue to make a character live. No long paragraphs of descriptions may be used to flesh out the character. This means, of course, that you must work overtime. You must watch motive, speech, gesture, mannerisms, and general behavior.

1. Solanio and Salerio appear, together or singly, in eight scenes from Act I, Scene i, to Act IV, Scene i. Do you know them much better in Act IV than you did when they first came on stage? Did they become more complex and interesting as the play developed? If you think the answer to these two questions is no, you are correct. Solanio and Salerio are splendid examples of the way Shakespeare handled his minor characters. But still there is much you should know about his team. What can you conclude about them once you know they are from Venice? Examine again the scenes in which Solanio and Salerio appear. What is the specific purpose for each appearance? What generalizations can you make about the function of minor characters?

2. You saw when you read Act II, Scene ii that the Gobbos (Launcelot and his father) provided a little comic relief which delighted Shakespearian audiences. Now that you have read the entire play, can you see another purpose Launcelot serves? In answering this question, consider the actions of Jessica. Consider also how alone Shylock is at the end of Act IV, Scene i. How does Launcelot help Jessica describe life in her father's house?

3. When you first met Bassanio, you must have been immediately aware of his weaknesses. Confident of his charm, he has, for some time, allowed Antonio the privilege of supporting him. In Act I, Scene i, Bassanio, still in the role of the parasite, again seeks Antonio's financial assistance. But this time, Antonio is to be a kind of middle man. With Antonio's immediate support, Bassanio will have the opportunity to make a bid for the really sizeable, more permanent fortune of Portia. In his usual confident manner, he feels that he has impressed Portia favorably ("Sometimes from her eyes/I did receive fair speechless messages"). Portia's approval, however nebulous, is the collateral Bassanio offers Antonio. Is shrewdness or love the dominant tone of Bassanio's early speeches? Defend your answer. Why do you think Bassanio warns Gratiano to behave himself when he (Gratiano) accompanies him to Belmont? Is Bassanio as here represented typical of the young men of Venice? Contrast Bassanio's attitudes with Antonio's. Remember when Solanio says of the latter, "he only loves the world for him [Bassanio]."

Still you must consider what you know of Portia and what she says about her love for him --"yet for you I would be trebled twenty times myself, A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich." What qualities can you see in Bassanio which would justify Portia's opinion of him? Does Bassanio seem to become a more genuine, less selfish person as the play progresses? Defend your answer by specific reference to his words and actions.

Consider, now, the characterization of Bassanio in terms of the possible theme of the play: Venice vs. Belmont; the marketplace vs. love. The mercenary lover of Venice is conquered by the idealistic lover of Belmont. Examine Act III, Scene ii and discuss the thinking which governs Bassanio's choice of caskets. See how Bassanio has grown. Consider Gratiano's comment when he says that Antonio "will be glad of our success;/ We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece." Is Gratiano still a figure of the Venetian marketplace?

Bassanio's new moral strength is put to the test when word comes of Antonio's fate. He declares that he will go at once to offer his assistance. Does Bassanio really play a very positive part in the rescue? What, then, can you conclude is the playwright's attitude toward Bassanio? What is your attitude toward him?

4. Portia is clearly a study in contrasts. In her is the voice of authority and yet also the spirit of humility. In her is wit and shrewdness. She is young and inexperienced, and yet her self-reliance and judgment reveal a maturity shared by no other character in the play. She sees the seriousness of life and yet doesn't pass up a chance for fun even at life's most serious moments. A defender of the law, she pleads for mercy, but shows none when she deals with Shylock. You may accept the above characteristics and refer to passages which justify them. Or, if you wish, you may question some or all of these points. Perhaps, for example, you feel that Portia was merciful in dealing with Shylock. Perhaps you feel that she gave no evidence of humility. Be certain, however, that you can defend your stand by specific reference to her words, actions, gesture, or manners.

4. Gratiano offers a special kind of challenge. Up to a certain point, Shakespeare uses him in a fairly conventional way. He needs Gratiano to make his play work. Bassanio needs a companion when he travels to Belmont, and Nerissa needs a lover. Through Gratiano you are given a clearer picture of Bassanio. But consider what happens to Gratiano in the courtroom scene. Do his actions surprise you? How does he change? How do the other characters in this scene treat him?

5. On the surface, Antonio offers little difficulty. Like Gratiano, he is a stock figure, representing the ideal of male friendship. Life itself is not too dear a price to pay for friendship, so Antonio accepts his fate with beautiful resignation, requesting only that Bassanio "live still, and write mine epitaph." But Antonio's role in the play is much more than that of the unselfish friend. What role does he play in relationship to Shylock and his people? Locate the lines in which Shylock so aptly describes Antonio's role. Antonio is surely a persecutor, but almost an instinctive one. He does not plot his methods of persecution. He does not calculate, but acts as though there were no other way to act. Locate, in Act IV, Scene i, Shylock's speech in which he describes the kind of treatment he has received from Antonio. How does Antonio reply? Can you justify the playwright's creation of a character who has two such different sides; the gently, foolishly devoted friend and the cruel persecutor of a man and a race? Do you know anyone with this kind of personality contradiction?

6. Shylock plays the role of the usurer, a role which history had forced upon many of his race. Shylock of course has made the most of his life. You must view him as the text presents him, sympathizing when he deserves sympathy and chastising him when his actions demand such a reaction. Attitudes have changed since Shakespeare's time. For example, in pre-capitalistic times, the collection of interest on a loan was considered to be a kind of thievery so that Shakespeare's audience would consider Shylock fair game and would think Jessica's theft of her father's ducats a humorous and appropriate way of evening the score. Considering these comments, answer the following:
   (a) Select a passage in which Shylock shows that he is a master of the art of ironic impersonation.
   (b) Shylock's intelligence is far superior to that of his antagonists, except perhaps Portia. Select passages which show his keen intelligence. A good starting point is his condemnation of Christian hypocrisy. What has forced Shylock to sharpen his intelligence?
   (c) What does Shylock achieve by the use of simple, concrete verbs and nouns and by parallelism and repetition? Locate the speech in which Shylock shows that he is speaking for his whole race, not for himself.

   Although Shylock is a product of many grave injustices, Shakespeare makes it clear that those who return hate with hate, revenge with revenge, must in the end pay for their misdeeds. The real point here is that only forgiveness and mercy can remove revenge and hate. But the "mercy" in our play is a kind of magic, coming as it does from the magic land of Belmont. In your very

real world of the twentieth century how would you have dealt with Shylock? With Antonio? Is your attitude more enlightened than Portia's? Has your world, in other words, learned anything since Shakespeare's time about prejudice, injustice, hyprocrisy? Can Shylock enlighten you as he should have enlightened Shakespearian audiences?

The Play as a Whole

Refer to page 2 of the Student Version and re-read the comments about form. A suggestion is made that the theme of the play can be thought of as the opposition between love and hate. This opposition is reflected in a contrast between two places, Venice and Belmont.

1. Can you see any reason why Belmont cannot be located on the map? What kind of world might it be? Locate Venice. For what has it been famous? What two conflicting forces do these places represent? What attitudes and practices characterize each world?

2. What kinds of subjects do people generally discuss in Venice? In Belmont

3. Read Act II, Scene i, and Act V. Describe the settings of these acts. How does music blend with the general atmosphere of each scene? What does Lorenzo say about "The man that hath no music in himself" (Act V, Scene 1)?

4. Is there much serious conflict between characters in the scenes at Belmont? The scenes in Venice? Pay careful attention to description, dialogue, and action.

5. What differences in dialogue do you notice between those scenes taking place in Belmont and those in Venice?

6. Of which world is Shylock? How does Act I, Scene ii, introduce Portia, chief figure in the world of Belmont? Notice the contrast between Shylock's manner of speech (Act III, Scene i) and Lorenzo and Jessica's speech (Act V, Scene i).

7. Act IV, Scene i, can be considered a struggle between conflicting characters, worlds, and themes. Can you explain this position? What basic institution of civilization does Shylock represent? Although Portia brings with her the magic of Belmont, the magic of love, how does she use her opponent's weapon to save Antonio?

8. The conflict between the places and the people ends in Act V. Jessica and Lorenzo set the scene for the harmony that is to follow the tense courtroom drama. How does Shakespeare achieve a feeling of harmony in Act V through theme, narrative, character, and place?

9. The Merchant of Venice is classified as a "comedy," a term used to describe a play that ends in prosperity. Do you think "comedy" describes it well? Do you think "romance" would be a better word? A famous student of Shakespeare calls it a "fairy tale." Which description seems to fit it the best? Or would all three terms apply? Defend your answer.